

Revealing the Taboo: A Theatrical Investigation

by

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ABSTRACT

The project, *Revealing the Taboo: A Theatrical Investigation*, is a study into theatre that attempts to break down the barriers between open society and its regulatory alternative, the area of taboos. Initial motivations for the project were drawn from my experience as a playwright, exploring themes such as paedophilia and child abuse. My previous work prompted the question, 'If taboos are revealed from a perspective that attempts to challenge the social norm, how might that affect the sensitivities of an audience?'

The exegesis (the theoretical component of the project) presents an extensive exploration of the relationships taboos have with contemporary theatrical presentation. Through the exegesis I establish a contemporary definition for taboo in relation to the theatre, differentiating it from current trends such as Aleks Sierz's 'In-Yer-Face' theatre. Set against the theatrical context, I also examine taboo as a current social norm, incorporating both the sanctions and penalties attracted by those who deviate from that norm. The exegesis supports the key focus of the project, the examination and creation of theatre that reveals taboo behaviour from a challenging perspective, in the process jeopardising the very concept of social norms. This style of theatre questions the status of certain taboos by reducing the degree of deviance associated with participation in taboo behaviour. The project identifies and presents a genre, Theatre of Taboos, and the exegesis examines the construction and effectiveness of this hypothesised genre. Three areas are particularly examined: firstly, taboos and incorporation of taboos in the theatre; secondly, cultural boundaries, limitations and restrictions – sanctions and penalties; and thirdly, the construction and sensitivities of the contemporary theatrical audience.

The creative component of the project consists of a script presented through theatrical performance, these complementing and giving life to the notions set out in the theoretical investigation. The script, *Ruled Lines*, is an attempt to show a positive perspective of a taboo relationship between a teacher and their student, revealing taboos from a perspective that raises awareness of and challenges perceptions of what might constitute socially-condoned behaviour.

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Table of Contents

	Page
Statement of Originality	i
Statement of Authority to Access	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Table of Contents – Volume I	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Taboos: and their Incorporation in Theatre	4
1.1 Defining Taboo: In relation to contemporary culture	4
1.2 Taboos: as operating in a Theatre of Taboos	12
1.3 Taboo Breaking within Contemporary Theatre	13
1.4 Original Theatrical Component	19
Chapter 2 Cultural Boundaries: Limitations and Restrictions, Sanctions and Penalties	23
Chapter 3 The Construction and Sensitivities of the Contemporary Theatre Audience	31
3.1 The Audience as a consumer	31
3.2 The Audience as a Social Group	35
Conclusion	38
References	40
Bibliography	42
Volume II Appendices	

Introduction

‘Revealing the Taboo’ investigates contemporary theatre that attempts to break down the barriers between open society and its other, the area of taboos. The investigation focuses on contemporary scripted drama that addresses themes considered culturally forbidden. It explores the tacitly condoned activities of our society, looking at the prohibited, the unspoken and the controversial. Ultimately, the investigation examines the ways in which certain contemporary theatre reveals taboos, identifying both what is revealed and how. I have coined the term ‘Theatre of Taboos’ for this genre. In examining the concept of taboo, the research focuses on the culturally devised social norms of what is considered appropriate behaviour within society and what is not. Importantly, the investigation incorporates the sensitivities that surround a Theatre of Taboos, in relation to a conventional theatre audience. The research specifically identifies the audience as a representative of society.

The thematic content of the Theatre of Taboos, like most theatre, can create a discourse subject to sensitivities, emotions and opinions. By revealing proscribed behaviour, the Theatre of Taboos can challenge why certain behaviour is considered taboo. The Theatre of Taboos’ process of revealing becomes inseparable from the process of challenging whether a practice or behaviour is appropriate or not.

The research will investigate the concept of Theatre of Taboos in relation to giving and receiving permission. The practice of theatre itself is influenced by permission, including the implications of transcending permission. There are external cultural systems that affect the theatre, such as censorship, in various forms, and social control through limitations, restrictions, laws, sanctions and penalties. Also, the audience requires and extends permission to view the culturally prohibited. Likewise, the performance extends permission to respond.

My investigation was prompted by a certain genre of theatre that emerged from the United Kingdom in the mid-nineteen nineties. Aleks Sierz has labelled this genre ‘In-Yer-Face’, defining In-Yer-Face as ‘any drama that takes the audience by the scruff

of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message' (Sierz 2000, p.4). Sierz's text, *In-Yer-Face Theatre, British Drama Today* (2000), has become central to my research. It includes and promotes specific taboo-breaking theatre. Sierz highlights the work of Anthony Neilson, Mark Ravenhill and Martin McDonagh, amongst others, who confront and transcend taboo prohibitions.

I am further motivated by theatre that I have written and produced myself. While studying for my Honours degree in Contemporary Arts (2004), I wrote and directed the play 'Heads in the Sand', which was concerned with the psychology and motivation behind paedophilia. The aim of the production was to show a perspective of paedophilia with which the audience would be otherwise unfamiliar. One of my intentions was to present the perpetrator as a victim. This gave the audience permission to sympathise with the perpetrator. The production developed the question that prompted this investigation – if paedophilia is taboo, and presented from a perspective such as 'Heads in the Sand', how might it affect the sensitivities of an audience and perhaps threaten their moral values?

Resulting from the local experience of writing and producing 'Heads in the Sand', and the international exposure of *In-Yer-Face*, five specific research questions emerged. How do taboos operate in theatre? How does this operation relate to society's norms? What effect does the Theatre of Taboos have on an audience? Does the unwritten contract between theatre and audience become compromised? And finally, is the style and method through which the taboo is revealed or broken dependant on individual responses to these questions?

The results of the research are an evaluation of the sensitivities of the theatre, as well as its audience, when each is exposed to a Theatre of Taboos, and in terms of how might the theatre accept the genre. This includes a consideration of how the text/production interprets taboos, and how that affects the outcome. Also, the research assumes that the Theatre of Taboos is a specific genre. The research evaluates its future and assesses the importance of incorporating such a genre into the theatrical spectrum.

The theatrical research was conducted through two avenues. The first was a production of Anthony Neilson's, *The Censor* (1997), from the In-Yer-Face canon. Directed by myself, it was staged on 18-19 May 2006. I chose the play because it relates directly to the premise of my research: revealing taboos, from a perspective that challenges the audience's perception of the taboo, questioning the status of the taboo.

The second avenue was my major creative component. It comprises all the concepts incorporated in the research, and is a play that I have written and which I will direct and produce for my assessment in early March 2007. Titled 'Ruled Lines', it concentrates on revealing a taboo from a perspective designed to test the sensitivities of the theatre, and its audience.

The production of 'Ruled Lines' is supported by three components of theoretical research, as set out in this exegesis: firstly, taboos, and their incorporation in theatre; secondly, cultural boundaries, limitations and restrictions – sanctions and penalties; and thirdly, the construction and sensitivities of the contemporary theatrical audience. These three elements are designed to encompass the effect of a Theatre of Taboos, the manner of its operation, and to its purpose and outcome. This combined should answer the underlying question of what is the importance of a Theatre of Taboos to contemporary theatrical presentation, and what does it offer to its audience?

1.0 Taboos: and their Incorporation in Theatre

This chapter establishes the relationships between taboos and the society in which I live, in particular the relationship between taboos and contemporary theatre. This includes a study of Western society, through the involvement and participation of taboos, investigating how taboos are constructed and how they operate. The chapter examines the effect taboos have on society, including the moralistic connotations. The chapter looks at the correlation between taboos and the social value system and the social system of beliefs. The chapter centres on theatre that reveals and challenges taboos, and how that creates what I refer to as Theatre of Taboos. In addition, the chapter incorporates an investigation of the In-Yer-Face genre, akin to and prompting a Theatre of Taboos; investigating how the theatre reveals taboos and what, if any, are the repercussions in doing so.

1.1 Defining Taboo: in Relation to Contemporary Culture

Defining taboo has proved problematic. Other problems I have encountered include relating the primitive understandings of the word to modern social interaction, and offering contemporary criteria suitable for identifying taboo. To establish a contemporary understanding of taboo I turned towards sociological references: *Understanding Society, An Introduction to Sociology* (1987), by Caroline Hodges-Persell; and *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (2000), by Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner. I also heavily utilise Sigmund Freud's 1913 essay, 'Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence', from the publication *Freud: Totem and Taboo* (2001), in assisting to comprehend the meaning of taboo. Freud's essay is concerned with the origins of the word, and because it reflects the era in which it is written, it is difficult to relate it to contemporary social norms. The essay still proves a valuable resource. In the following discussion I have used large sections from Freud's essay to illuminate the contemporary understanding of the word.

The simplest use of the word, 'taboo', is to describe 'strongly prohibited social practice' (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.88). In this use it can refer 'to anything (food, place, activity) which is prohibited and forbidden' (Abercrombie 2000, p.356).

To extend this basic understanding, I will examine 'taboo' a social norm. Hodges-Persell describes 'social norms' as the 'shared rules about acceptable and unacceptable social behaviour' (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.87). All societies, across the globe, have social norms, varying from one society to the next.

Hodges-Persell divides social norms into four identifiable categories:

Folkways – the everyday activities within a small-scale society that have become established and are socially sanctioned. Folkways are not severely sanctioned and are not abstract principles. The example Hodges-Persell offers is wearing matching socks.

Mores – strong social norms, the violation of which arouses a sense of moral outrage. Implicit in this category is the understanding that violation of mores cause a moral conflict.

Laws – social norms that have been formally enacted by political bodies, and enforced by the police, military or other organizations.

Taboo – the strongest form of social norm, described as strongly prohibited social practice, and thus distinguishable from mores and laws.
(Hodges-Persell 1987, p.88)

Hodges-Persell states that social norms are supported by society's value system. She describes values as being 'strongly held general ideas people share about what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable' (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.89).

Captain Cook first introduced the word taboo to the English language, recording it in his 1771 Journal, whilst visiting Tonga in the South Pacific. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes that amongst the Polynesians, and others of the South Pacific, the word was used to describe the 'separated or set apart as sacred; forbidden for general use; placed under a prohibition or banned'.

Freud, in 'Taboo and the Emotional Ambivalence', also refers to the word being of Polynesian origin. Freud attempts to establish a meaning for the word based on its heritage, commenting that 'it is difficult to find a translation for it [taboo]', because of it being a primitive, Polynesian, word (Freud 2001, p.21). The initial definition Freud offers is as follows:

The meaning of 'taboo', as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, 'sacred', 'consecrated' and on the other 'uncanny', 'dangerous', 'forbidden', 'unclean'. The converse of 'taboo' in Polynesian is '*noa*', which means 'common' or 'generally accessible'. Thus 'taboo' has about it a sense of something unapproachable, and it is principally expressed in prohibitions and restrictions. (Freud 2001, p.21)

In the context of this project there is not space to offer a full synopsis of Freud's essay. However, I will employ the dual directionality of taboo as presented by Freud, looking at the 'sacred', and the 'dangerous' aspects of the word for what they contribute to its contemporary meaning. Firstly, to examine and understand the 'sacred' aspect of taboo, which implies taboo as a symbolic placement. Both Freud, in his essay, and Abercrombie, in *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, refer to the 'sacred' taboo as totem. A totem 'is a plant, animal or object which is the symbol of a social group' (Abercrombie 2000, p.362). The totem is taboo: 'A totem animal or plant may be eaten on ritual occasions (the totemic feast), but otherwise it is carefully avoided as sacred' (Abercrombie 2000, p.362). The concept is that 'taboo' is sacred and untouchable, and yet present and necessary. Freud comments that the 'most ancient and important taboo prohibitions are the two basic laws of totemism: not to kill the totem animal and to avoid sexual intercourse with members of the totem clan of the opposite sex' (Freud 2001, p.37). Second, is the idea that taboo is 'dangerous', 'forbidden' or 'unclean'. This relates to 'sacred' meaning of taboo, and that once a certain taboo is violated the offender will become 'unclean'. To violate a certain taboo is 'forbidden' and/or 'dangerous'; and yet is defined by the clan who exercises the taboo.

Freud continues in his Polynesian examination: 'the strangest fact seems to be that anyone who has transgressed one of these prohibitions himself acquires the characteristic of being prohibited – as though the whole of the dangerous charge has been transferred over to him' (Freud 2001, pp.25-26). Individuals who violate taboo prohibitions risk being shunned by society. They attach the taboo to themselves: 'anyone who has violated a taboo becomes taboo himself... and for that reason he himself must be shunned' (Freud 2001, p.38).

In defining taboo, we can assume that modern Western society has adopted the word to stand for any number of prohibitions. In relation to taboo being predicated on a

social norm, taboos are socially derived from a level of direct participation in unaccepted social behaviour. Partnered with participation is the unspeakable aspect of taboos. The connotation is of being 'sacred', 'forbidden', 'dangerous' or 'unclean', either by participation and/or discussion. The understanding is that taboo is inherent in society, even hereditary, yet unspoken.

Therefore what constitutes a behaviour, practice, place or object being taboo? I refer to exceptions, posed by Freud, to extract possible foundations. He explains, through the primitive meaning of the word, what it is that is distinct about taboos and how they might be defined:

Taboo restrictions are distinct from religious or moral prohibitions. They are not based upon any divine ordinance, but may be said to impose themselves on their own account. They differ from moral prohibitions in that they fall into no system that declares quite generally that certain abstinences must be observed and gives reasons for that necessity. Taboo prohibitions have no grounds and are of unknown origin. Though they are unintelligible to us, to those who are dominated by them they are taken as a matter of course. (Freud 2001, p.22)

The idea that taboo is distinct from moral and religious prohibitions is supported by Hodges-Persell. As noted previously, she separates 'taboos' from 'mores' and 'laws' in her description of social norms (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.88).

Taboos may exist as protection devices, to protect a certain person, such as a chief, priest, or other person of symbolic position; to safeguard the weak, the woman and children, the commoners; to defend against the dangers of coming into contact with the dead, certain foods or animals, or anything otherwise designated unclean; to support against the wrath of gods, spirits, or ghosts; or to secure the unborn, and children against interference (Freud 2001, p.23). Taboos can be permanent, temporary, can be put in place indefinitely, or periodically, depending on changes in cycles, growth, maturity, or in relation to other social rituals (Freud 2001, p.23).

To be taboo, there must be some attraction, a desire to transcend the prohibition. After all, there is little need to prohibit something that nobody desires (Freud 2001, p.41). Without desire, there is no limit nor is there an object of desire to be revealed.

I do not believe moral prohibitions and taboo prohibitions are far removed, certainly as understood and expressed in modern terminology. When violated, they both result in a sense of guilt. Seemingly, both are defined by non-acceptable behavioural patterns. Both can be instigated by ordinances, other than religious and governing bodies, that is, they can be informally and socially generated. I believe the modern understanding, of what is taboo, is strongly connected to a socially acquired conscience. I agree with Freud that, unlike religious prohibitions, taboo prohibitions are stimulated by what a societal conscience deems unacceptable. In the simplest definition, conscience is the ability to determine right from wrong. Hodges-Persell relates social conscience to social values. To reiterate, Hodges-Persell describes values as 'strongly held general ideas people share about what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable' (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.89). Therefore, taboo must be connected to a social conscience. Freud supports this notion:

If I am not mistaken, the explanation of taboo also throws light on the nature and origin of conscience. It is possible, without any stretching of the sense of the terms, to speak of a taboo conscience or, after a taboo has been violated, of a taboo sense of guilt. Taboo conscience is probably the earliest form in which the phenomenon of conscience is met with. (Freud 2001, p.79)

I offer Freud's definition of taboo, which comes towards the conclusion of 'Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence'. In this extract, Freud connects taboo with a sense of emotional ambivalence:

Our discussion, on the contrary, lead us to the simple conclusion that the word 'taboo' had a double meaning from the very first and that it was used to designate a particular kind of ambivalence and whatever arose from it. 'Taboo' is itself an ambivalent word; and one feels on looking back that the well-attested meaning of the word should alone have made it possible to infer – what has actually been arrived at as a result of extensive researches – that the prohibitions of taboo are to be understood as a consequence of emotional ambivalence. (Freud 2001, p.78)

The *Macquarie Dictionary* (1998) defines ambivalence as being 'the coexistence in one person of opposite and conflicting feelings towards someone or something', a position which supports my premise in light of Freud's conclusion. Also, the idea of an emotional ambivalence relates to conscience, in that it might seem desirable to transcend a taboo prohibition, yet it is wrong to do so. To establish a contemporary meaning of taboo, I believe we have to incorporate Freud's definition in the context of contemporary society, looking at taboo as a current social norm, and what effect

taboos have on our current system of social values. In establishing this, we should understand the position of taboo in our culture.

Like taboo, culture is difficult to define. According to Raymond Williams, 'culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams 1984, p.87). A dictionary definition is that culture is the 'sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings'. Abercrombie provides a helpful definition of culture, in light of this research. He defines culture as 'symbolic and learned, non-biological aspects of human society, which include language, custom and convention, by which human behaviour can be distinguished from that of other primates' (Abercrombie 2000, p.83). Therefore, my understanding is that culture can be used to describe the systems of socially acquired values, beliefs, and rules of conduct that define the range of accepted behaviour in any given society.

It is not difficult to make a strong connection between taboo and culture, as certain behaviour may be accepted in one culture but not another. In fact, culture may stand and act as an agency for social norms, of which taboo is a part. Hereafter, in terms of this project, any reference to culture refers to the sum total of ways of living in society, unless specifically described otherwise.

To associate taboo with culture, I will specifically clarify taboo behaviour. Taboo behaviour occurs when a taboo prohibition is broken. This creates taboo participants. Participants violate values, attitudes and behaviours, prescribed as acceptable by society. Participants violate social norms. Hodges-Persell refers to people who violate social norms as deviants, associating taboo deviants with those who violate social values:

Nothing is intrinsically deviant. The same personal characteristics or behaviour can be considered deviant in one instance but not in another. Burping after a meal, tattooing one's face, having intercourse with one's cousin... are all behaviours considered deviant in some societies. The determining factor is whether a significant expectation or norm is being violated by the behaviour or trait. Furthermore, other people or groups must see and react negatively to the behaviour or trait. As Durkheim noted, an action does not offend society because it is deviant. Instead, it is deviant because it offends society.

Behaviours that offend society the most are the ones that violate strongly held norms. There is a strongly held prohibition against child molesting, for example. Not only is such action illegal, but it arouses moral indignation as well. (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.151)

Because of the varying nature of social norms from one society to the next, deviance has no set criteria, but is more a matter of degree, informed by time and place.

Hereafter taboo participants will be referred to as taboo deviants, as their behaviour violates social norms and transcends taboo prohibitions.

Taboo deviants operate as a sub-culture: '...subculture refers to the values, attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles of a social group, which is distinct from, but related to, the dominant culture of society' (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.91). While taboo deviants might not collectively establish a specific sub-cultural social group, they do share common values, attitudes, behaviour and lifestyle. A 'social group' refers to:

Collections of people who know each other and interact on the basis of common expectations. As a result they tend to feel a sense of belonging and shared identity. Groups differ from aggregates, which are collections of people who do not know each other and who feel no sense of belonging together. (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.129)

As a social group, taboo deviants participate in the 'sacred', 'forbidden' and 'unclean'. Their behaviour is unacceptable to the dominant culture of society. Therefore, they operate on a level outside what is accepted. Taboo deviants operate in a sub-cultural environment, and their behaviour 'arouses moral indignation'.

While the idea of a social group might offer a way of defining taboo deviants as a whole, they are also made particular by the dictionary definition of 'aggregate', as being 'formed by the conjunction or collection of particulars into a whole mass or sum'. Commonly, taboo deviants are not in contact as a group, they are without interaction. Therefore, Persell's description of a social 'aggregate' (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.129) is more appropriate when defining taboo deviants as a social group.

The cultural and temporal specificity of taboo makes it hard to offer, at this point, a definitive answer as to what are specific forms of taboo prohibitions. What we can definitively state is that the violation of taboo prohibitions is socially unacceptable behaviour. While, as Freud states, religious prohibitions are not the same as taboo prohibitions, he himself is not satisfied with the exclusion of moral prohibitions in the construction of certain taboos, stating:

...a further point must not be overlooked which will pave the way for later inquiries. In maintaining the essential similarity between taboo prohibitions and moral

prohibitions, I have sought to dispute the fact there must be a psychological difference between them. The only possible reason why the prohibitions no longer take the form of taboos must be some change in the circumstances governing the ambivalence underlying them. (Freud 2001, p.82)

In identifying taboo prohibitions, you acknowledge a sense of moral conflict, including an emotional ambivalence and a sense of guilt. Because governing and/or religious bodies do not exclusively declare taboo prohibitions, taboo prohibitions employ ambivalent feelings of guilt to establish themselves. Taboos are designed to protect, to set a part as sacred, forbid contact and prevent interference. Taboos are unspoken, understood, relying on a belief system that penetrates our culture. They are implicitly taught, rather than explicitly taught. Taboo is ambivalent. At this point in discussion, I can best characterise taboo as – the behaviour and practices (including the immoral) within our society, which our conscience informs us are unacceptable and forbidden. Taboos are dependant on desire; there must be an attraction to taboo prohibitions. Otherwise, these would not exist. To participate in taboos would mean breaking social norms and to be deviant. To be deviant is to risk being shunned.

Taboos can be described variously as ‘sacred’, ‘forbidden’, ‘unclean’ and ‘dangerous’. This project, specifically the production of ‘Ruled Lines’, focuses on the taboo deviant who willingly participates in strongly prohibited social practice, acting against the forbidden and entering the realm of the dangerous. The project explores ‘taboo’ as the violation of social mores, behaving unacceptably according to social acceptability. Through the production ‘taboo’ is seen as the practice of what is morally and socially forbidden. As a society we acknowledge taboos, whether we are deviants or not: taboos are defined against social mores and may or may not involve the breaking of laws that put those mores into practice.

How does society operate with taboos? There are certain taboo behaviours that are tolerated. Hodges-Persell writes about social norms, including taboo, as being supported by sanctions. Sanctions act as a control system for social norms:

A sanction is a reward or penalty directed at desired or undesired behaviour. Negative sanctions include disapproving looks, negative gossip, social shunning, imprisonment, and the electric chair. Positive sanctions range from prizes such as the Nobel award, praise, applause, esteem, and financial rewards, to smiles. (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.88)

Taking examples from Hodges-Persell, a taboo deviant could be subject to disapproving looks, negative comment, gossip, shunning and imprisonment. As it goes against a social norm, taboo behaviour can lead to imprisonment, that is, it may operate within the social norm formalised as law. Sanctions such as these will be examined further, as a deterrent of taboo behaviour in Chapter 2, 'Cultural Boundaries: Restrictions and Limitations – Sanctions and Penalties'.

Essentially, taboos are strong prohibitions, which vary from one society to another, depending on a society's particular social norms. The prohibitions can be placed on anything, ranging from person, place or animal, to food and other objects. The prohibition can be seasonal, periodical or permanent. Unlike prohibitions prescribed by ordained conventions, taboo prohibitions are of an emotional ambivalence, not generated by religious or governing bodies. They are in place to protect, to make sacred, to prevent. They are, I believe, connected to the moral understanding of what is right and wrong. Therefore, taboos are inherent in society's value system of knowing what is acceptable and what is not. Taboos operate on a sub-cultural level. Taboo deviants (best referred to collectively as a social aggregate) share the common practice of taboo behaviour, and the same violation of society's norms.

1.2 Taboo: as Operating in a Theatre of Taboos

Theatre has the ability to re-create or simulate taboo behaviour in a realistic perspective, without fear of sanctions. Sanctions are imposed in open society to control unacceptable behaviour. The theatre can enter the sub-cultural environments of taboo practice safely, presenting it to open society. Theatre of Taboos presents the sacred, forbidden and unclean practices of society, bringing sub-cultural behaviour to a level where it can be viewed safely, allowing the taboo to be discussed and the social norm challenged.

The theatrical performance in question is the dramatisation of taboo behaviour for the contemporary stage. I am only investigating contemporary, scripted performance, not that of alternative or otherwise neo-avant-garde productions. I am aware that alternative forms of theatre might be breaking prohibitions relating to taboo. This investigation, though, concentrates on naturalistic theatre, which I believe has a

greater ability to re-create and simulate taboo behaviour realistically, in the sense that it connects directly to the audience. This allows me to look towards that audience and to analyse how viewing a realistic representation of the 'sacred', 'forbidden' or 'unclean' affects it. (I will address this affect further in the final chapter of this exegesis, Chapter 3, 'The Construction and Sensitivities of the Contemporary Theatre Audience'.)

Currently, I am concerned with how taboos operate in the context of a Theatre of Taboos. The presentation style can affect the status of the taboo, either by minimising or maximising it. The degree of deviance associated with participating in taboo behaviour can be modified through characterisation and plot structure, questioning the taboo's capacity to be considered taboo in the first place. The presentation style might present the taboo positively, or in a favourable light. What becomes integral to this investigation is the question – 'What has the theatre revealed about a taboo, how is the taboo revealed, and why?'

I asserted previously that taboo behaviour is active within society. If this is the case, if active practice of taboo is a social inevitability, theatre can be seen as presenting a social norm that involves tangible behaviours and/or practices that actually occur within society. These can be presented through actions and movements; simulated taboo behaviour. Alternatively, taboo could be presented through ideas, as a theme based performance.

1.3 Taboo-Breaking within Conventional Theatre

Theatre has a history of addressing taboos, revealing them in such a way that the audience is confronted with their own sense of social norms and social values. The work of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw acted the same way as theatre that addresses taboos does today. At the turn of the twentieth century their controversial work revealed topics that pushed the boundaries of acceptance, presenting the forbidden and sacred behaviour of its time.

Ibsen explored social issues that were not usually examined in the theatre of his time. Initially his play, *Ghosts* (1881), was not well received because of its subject matter

concerning adultery and syphilis. The German debut of *Ghosts* was before an invited audience in Augsburg, on 14 April 1886. It sparked a violent argument that intensified at its first public German performance at the Freie Buhne, in 1890. *Ghosts* was even banned in England, because it failed to 'show respect for the institution of marriage and because it dealt with the taboo topic of venereal disease' (Sova 2004, p.99).

Shaw's play, *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1898), explored society's hypocritical attitudes towards prostitution at that time. The play did not receive a licence for public performance by the English censors because of its content, and thus, struggled to find a stage. The Independent Theatre Society assisted Shaw for two years in trying to find a theatre manager willing to risk staging the unlicensed and controversial play (Sova 2004, p.186). Shaw stated the themes are designed to:

...draw attention to the truth that prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing, and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together. (Shaw 1957, p.181)

At the turn of the twenty-first century a similar movement of confrontational theatre has occurred. New writers set about revealing taboos. Presenting theatre that simulated and re-created the actions and practise of modern taboo behaviour, showing a perspective of taboo behaviour normally left unseen. The movement has earned the title In-Yer-Face.

In-Yer-Face questions what we should or shouldn't show, especially on stage. It explores the most controversial and shocking topics imaginable. Sierz's book, *In-Yer-Face Theatre, British Drama Today*, is the most comprehensive report of the explosive and notorious theatre that spanned the last decade of the twentieth century. Sierz writes, the best In-Yer-Face theatre 'taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are' (Sierz 2000, p.4). Sierz asserts that In-Yer-Face does not allow an audience to sit back and contemplate what they see in detachment. In-Yer-Face takes the audience on an emotional journey, getting under the audience's skin (Sierz 2000, p.4).

In-Yer-Face is less about discussing taboos and more about showing them. Taking the tangible aspects of taboo behaviour and performing them. Subject matter is taken to the limit: 'If drama dealt with masculinity, it showed rape; if it got to grips with sex, it showed fellatio or anal intercourse; when nudity was involved, so was humiliation; if violence was wanted, torture was staged; when drugs were the issue, addiction was shown' (Sierz 2000, p.30). In-Yer-Face transcends society's taboo prohibitions, showing them with extreme boldness. Sierz writes, 'although drama has always represented human cruelty, never before had it seemed so common' (Sierz 2000, p.30).

Theatre of Taboos is a term I have coined myself. I believe Theatre of Taboos to be akin to In-Yer-Face. The difference being that In-Yer-Face is able to present a wider scope of behaviour than the Theatre of Taboos, and is not necessarily restricted to taboo behaviour. In-Yer-Face is confronting and volatile in style and presentation. The association between both genres is due to their confronting of social norms. In-Yer-Face utilises an aggressive approach against non-specific social norms, while the Theatre of Taboos confronts specific taboos.

What compelled me to define a distinct genre, aside of In-Yer-Face, was a handful of In-Yer-Face writers who directly addressed society's taboos. Anthony Neilson, Mark Ravenhill and Martin McDonagh used the movement to burst open taboos in an electrifying style. These playwrights epitomise what I consider my own work to be, that is Theatre of Taboos. Their work provides a challenging perspective of taboo prohibitions. They are considered In-Yer-Face because of their candour. In-Yer-Face provided writers with the freedom to explore and present sub-cultural behaviour directly and aggressively (Sierz 2000, p.31).

Neilson, Ravenhill and McDonagh construct their work around taboos, revealing them, and presenting them in a confronting perspective. Neilson's *The Censor* (1997), dealt with the taboo of coprophilia. He showed sexual gratification from the point of view of a coprophiliac. Ravenhill's disturbing portrayal of exploitation and consumerism is told through sex, violence, rape, homosexuality and sexual mutilation, in *Shopping and Fucking* (1996). And McDonagh's fairytale description of child abuse, *The Pillowman* (2003), is unsettling.

Through *The Censor*, Neilson presents a challenging perspective of a person who indulges in coprophilia. He doesn't ridicule the character of *Frank*, but through his characterisation allows the audience to understand and even sympathise with him. Neilson reveals a perspective of coprophilia that questions coprophilia's status as taboo. The *Stedman's Medical Dictionary* (2006) defines coprophilia as an abnormal, often obsessive interest in excrement, especially the use of faeces for sexual excitement. Neilson, through the context of the play, attempts to lessen the degree of deviance his audience would associate with coprophilia. The more the audience comes to understand *Frank* and his desires, the less confronting the taboo becomes. This growing awareness and even complicity on the part of the audience is of importance to my own project.

The Censor contains taboo discourse, essential to Theatre of Taboos, but also reveals taboo behaviour, simulating the taboo. The play comes to a theatrical climax during scene ten. There are no lines spoken, only stage directions. The complete scene ten stage directions are as follows:

Miss Fontaine lays newspaper down on the floor.
The Censor watches.
Fontaine encourages him to touch himself.
She raises her skirt and squats. *The Censor* watches, touching himself more vigorously.
It takes a while, but eventually she defecates.
She cleans herself, then moves away.
The Censor is in a state of extreme arousal.
She beckons him to come forward and make love to her.
He does.
(Neilson 1998, p.226)

Ravenhill focuses less on a singular taboo in *Shopping and Fucking*. Instead, he includes taboo behaviours and activities to support his central themes. Ravenhill attempts to show a society tarnished by the ideology of all that matters is buying and selling (Sierz 2000, p.145). He utilises extreme characters in extreme situations. The play becomes a symbolic market, dealing in food, shelter, sex and ultimately life. The characters enter into transactions with one another, raising the stakes amongst themselves.

Like Neilson, Ravenhill simulates taboo behaviour on stage. He draws on the powerful images of watching characters transcend taboo prohibitions. This is strongly presented in scene thirteen. To give a brief synopsis, the characters of Lulu, Robbie and Mark share an apartment. Mark has brought back to the apartment, Gary, a teenage rent boy. Gary negotiates to cover Lulu, Robbie and Mark's debts, if they promise to give him 'a good hurt' (Sierz, 2004, p.146). A good hurt implies being anally penetrated with a knife. A selection of the stage directions throughout scene thirteen runs in order as follows, demonstrating Ravenhill's simulation of taboos through theatrical performance:

Gary stands very still. Robbie slowly approaches him from behind...
...Robbie starts to undo Gary's trousers.
...Robbie pulls down Gary's trousers. He spits on his hand. Slowly he works the spit up Gary's arse.
...Robbie unzips his fly. Works spit on to his penis. He penetrates Gary. He starts to fuck him.
...Robbie pulls away. Mark goes through the same routine – spitting and penetrating Gary. He fucks him viciously.
... He hits Gary. Then pulls away from Gary.
...He hits Gary repeatedly.
(Ravenhill 2001, pp.82-83)

Ravenhill is able to blur the boundaries of social norms, when the audience understand that Gary has asked for, and accepted, his situation. The boundary of unacceptable behaviour becomes compromised. Gary requests to be penetrated with a knife, which we never see. The scene ends with:

Gary: Do it. Do it and I'll say 'I love you'.
Mark: Alright. You're dancing and I take you away.
(Ravenhill 2001, p.85)

Ravenhill's contempt for the taboo social norm in *Shopping and Fucking* is a prime example of Theatre of Taboos. He presents behaviour that we know occurs and we understand is socially unacceptable, and justifies it through his characterisation. Ravenhill challenges the taboo social norm, giving reason for a distinction between In-Yer-Face (able to present and confront all social norms, in any manner) and Theatre of Taboos (able to present and challenge the specific taboo social norm). The behaviour and practices throughout *Shopping and Fucking* are forbidden and unclean, both in practice and for the stage. Both Ravenhill and Neilson reveal taboos in such a way that the audience finds itself questioning the status of the taboo. The degree of deviance is lessened by the audience's emotional connection to the characters,

creating an emotional ambivalence towards the taboo. Sierz comments, that in *Shopping and Fucking*, ‘the scenes of overt sex or explicit violence were not as disturbing as the feeling that the characters were lost, somewhat clueless, prone to psychological collapse, vulnerable to exploitation’ (Sierz 2004, p.129).

Unlike Neilson and Ravenhill, McDonagh does not utilise simulations or recreations. Instead, McDonagh’s, 2004 Olivier Award Winning Best Play, *The Pillowman*, uses the subtleties of story telling to implicate the audience in the taboo. *The Pillowman* centres on a writer in an unnamed totalitarian state, who is being interrogated about the gruesome content of his short stories and their similarities to a series of child murders (McDonagh 2003). Child abuse is discussed through the theatrical interrogation, exploring the psychological disturbance of the victim. The audience’s imagination becomes the visual response McDonagh relies upon. He establishes a contrast between the clinical conditions of the interview room and the fairytale-like stories that are narrated.

The Pillowman is important in the context of Theatre of Taboos for two reasons. Firstly, it explores the unacceptable practice of child abuse, acknowledging child abuse as taboo, established to protect children from interference. Secondly, it demonstrates an emotional response to the deviant. *The Pillowman* is extremely violent in its delivery, showing the emotional perspective society holds of the taboo. The sanction, in this case, is physical punishment. McDonagh is able to demonstrate how taboos, especially that of child abuse, are perceived by society.

The choices Neilson, Ravenhill and McDonagh have made in their work give reason for them to be included in the Theatre of Taboos. The perspectives they use to reveal taboos, and the prohibitions they break, associate them with the genre. They support the notion that taboo behaviour is prevalent in society, attempting to show the sacred, forbidden and unclean. Their focus is on revealing, challenging and understanding taboos – being honest about their presence and not condemning their violation. Unlike *In-Yer-Face*, the Theatre of Taboos does not rely on enactment and aggressive audience confrontations to expose deviant behaviour.

The process of revealing, and doing so in such a way as to offer an insight into the sub-cultural environment of taboos, is integral to the concept of Theatre of Taboos. Commonly, society is not accustomed to viewing taboo behaviour. The audience is confronted through viewing what is commonly left unseen. They expect sanctions. When taboo behaviour is simulated, from the perspective presented in Theatre of Taboos, the audience becomes emotionally ambivalent. Do they sympathise with the deviant, or do they conform to the social norm and agree that it is unacceptable behaviour? Will the audience be sanctioned for supporting?

1.4 Original Theatrical Component

At this point I will introduce the original, theatrical, component of my project. This original component demonstrates how I have attempted to explore taboo behaviour. By presenting the transcending of taboo prohibitions and challenging the status of taboos, the original component is intended to signify the concept of Theatre of Taboos. The original component that I have scripted is titled 'Ruled Lines' (2006). I intend to direct 'Ruled Lines', and design the technical elements to demonstrate the outcomes of the research. While 'Ruled Lines' is the primary theatrical component of the research, it is supported by an earlier production of Neilson's *The Censor*. Both productions are undertaken as practical research elements, with 'Ruled Lines' the culmination of the project.

The 'Ruled Lines' script and production are designed to generate an emotional ambivalence within the viewing audience. Bringing into question moral and social value systems, by offering an alternative perspective of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour according to society. 'Ruled Lines' invites a theatrical discourse on the operation of taboos in society. The play is relevant to the Theatre of Taboos because it reveals taboos from a challenging perspective. Also, the play merges the taboo social aggregate (taboo deviants defined as a sub-cultural social group) with open society.

Staging *The Censor* was not proposed in the initial outline of the project. The opportunity arose through request and availability. Therefore, *The Censor* was seen as appropriate because of its minimal resource requirements. It is a one-act play, requires

a cast of three and has minimal technical requirements. That said, the production was not staged hurriedly, but due consideration was given to reduce the pressure on time and resources made available at that time. *Shopping and Fucking*, or *The Pillowman*, for example, would have required larger casts, greater rehearsal time and absorbed more technical resources. Being a supporting production, it was important that the infrastructure required for *The Censor* did not unduly deplete any resources made available for 'Ruled Lines'.

The Censor was performed in May 2006. The production was appropriate to the investigation because of its ability to demonstrate the proposed elements of Theatre of Taboos. Also, the play fittingly applies to the research questions and the production was seen as a useful way of workshopping and refining those questions. Being part of the In-Yer-Face canon, it supported the connection I have made between that genre and the Theatre of Taboos.

Of the many things I learnt from *The Censor*, one was the importance of Neilson's characterisation – combining deviancy with understanding and acceptance. I discovered a learning process within myself. Upon first reading *The Censor*, I found myself captivated by the sensationalism of scene ten, the dramatic climax. Through directing *The Censor*, I understood the importance of the play was not about a woman defecating on stage, but the internal torment of *Frank*. Neilson himself is quoted as saying; 'I wanted people to come out of the theatre not talking about the fact they had just seen a woman take a shit on stage' (Sierz 2000, p.83). Neilson demonstrates how you can break taboo prohibitions, while offering emotional connectivity between your characters and the audience.

The Censor reinforces one of the criteria I have stated for the Theatre of Taboos, that is, to show a perspective of taboo behaviour that leads to understanding and comprehension. The concept is not aimed at alienating deviants or condemning taboo behaviour. *The Censor* offers the idea that it is not what we see that is important, but how we interpret it. To understand the taboo is often more confronting than the taboo itself.

'Ruled Lines', however, is the primary theatrical component of this project, demonstrating the outcomes of the research. To achieve a suitable outcome, 'Ruled Lines' needed to address a relevant taboo. I looked towards sub-cultural based practices. My focus was drawn to statutory rape, or the sexual relationships of adults with minors. I tightened my focus to teacher/student sexual relations. When I examined statutory rape against what I consider appropriate criteria for being taboo, it seemed relevant: it is a forbidden behaviour (banned/illegal); immoral according to our cultural values; the action itself has the connotation of being unclean; the act is obscene, the practice of which is preferably kept quiet by the participants; that is accepted as occurring is evidenced by its illegal status.

'Ruled Lines' presents the audience with the visual violation of a taboo prohibition. The behaviour is revealed from a perspective that challenges whether the taboo should or should not be considered unacceptable behaviour.

Taking a lead from *The Censor*, I have attempted to reveal the taboo from the perspective of the characters, allowing for an emotional connection between them and the audience. The play is structured around one day in the life of *Adam*. *Adam* is *Michelle's* teacher and lover. *Adam* happens to be a friend of *Michelle's* father, *Frank*. The play is broken into two conversations held on the same day, a morning conversation between *Frank* and *Adam*, and an afternoon conversation between *Adam* and *Michelle*. The play opens a discourse on why statutory rape is considered taboo, and what degree of deviance is associated with the act, in the context of 'Ruled Lines'?

The incident in the play that incites the ensuing action is *Adam's* breaking of the relationship between himself and *Michelle* the previous day. *Adam's* guilt causes him to reveal the relationship to *Frank*. However, *Frank* acts as an obstacle, as does *Adam's* wife *Sonia*. The taboo behaviour of the play is supported when, as in the style of Neilson and Ravenhill, the taboo is simulated on stage – *Adam* and *Michelle* make love. The climax of the story occurs at the end of the play, when the relationships between *Adam* and *Michelle*, *Adam* and *Frank*, and *Adam* and *Sonia* are resolved.

The inclusion of the sexual act is important. In the same way coprophilia is used in *The Censor*, it invites the audience to witness simulated taboo behaviour. It breaks the prohibition of the forbidden, both as discussed behaviour, and as visual behaviour for the audience. It includes the audience in the taboo, as they become a witness to the behaviour. This might lead to a feeling of unwilling association, even complicity. Do they look, or do they look away? Importantly, the act itself supports the relationship between *Adam* and *Michelle*, assisting the audience to understand and interpret the taboo. The behaviour is not included to be shocking and/or controversial. It is simply to demonstrate a passionate and mature connection between the two characters, contradictory to the connotations surrounding statutory rape. The audience's emotions are directed towards ambivalence; do they accept, or decline to offer their support and sympathy towards the taboo relationship.

'Ruled Lines', as with *The Censor*, and other plays from the Theatre of Taboos, has become integral in answering the primary research question – what is it that the Theatre of Taboos has to offer its audience and society? The prospective answer is that it presents an understanding, awareness and acceptance of the taboo within society. The Theatre of Taboos can offer insight and communication into the sub-cultural environment of the taboo social aggregate. I have learnt this through staging *The Censor*. Hopefully, that feeling is exemplified with 'Ruled Lines'. Theatre, of which Ibsen, Shaw, In-Yer-Face and the Theatre of Taboos are part, has the ability to present behaviour and practices which otherwise struggle to find their own voice. Taboos are culturally established and cannot be diminished. They are a part of our social norms. Taboo prohibitions exist, the Theatre of Taboos is attempting to present, and question their status.

2.0 Cultural Boundaries:

Limitations and Restrictions, Sanctions and Penalties

Cultural boundaries are an established facet of any society and, in fact, define a society's character. Limitations and restrictions, sanctions and penalties inevitably impact on day-to-day life, and in-turn the Theatre of Taboos, even becoming its subject. Predictably, society will always place limitations and restrictions on behaviour, determining what is acceptable and unacceptable, and will impose sanctions and penalties on those who violate social norms. Therefore, the Theatre of Taboos is especially affected by limitations and restrictions, because it endeavours to transcend taboo prohibitions. Sierz writes about transcending cultural boundaries in relation to In-Yer-Face. This similarly applies to Theatre of Taboos:

[In-Yer-Face] implies being forced to see something close up, having your personal space invaded. It suggests the crossing of normal boundaries. In short, it describes perfectly the kind of theatre that puts audiences in just such a situation...
... In-Yer-Face theatre shocks audiences by the extremism of its language and images; unsettles them by its emotional frankness and disturbs them by its acute questioning of moral norms. (Sierz 2000, p.4)

The Theatre of Taboos figuratively assaults audience complacency. The audience might assume it is protected by self-formed or imposed cultural boundaries, resulting in a re-adjustment of sensitivities and an alteration in the level of consent between performance and audience when subjected to Theatre of Taboos. This concept of audience sensitivities will be addressed further in Chapter 3, 'The Construction and Sensitivities of the Contemporary Theatre Audience'.

At this point, I am concerned with how cultural boundaries affect a taboo's ability to operate in theatre, and to consider whether the Theatre of Taboos has been affected by, or acted on the manifestations of cultural boundaries – the sanctions and penalties imposed by society?

A boundary acts as a divide, where certain behaviour may be accepted in one situation or place, but not another. There are social boundaries that exist between the accepted level of behaviour for open society and the behaviour of sub-cultural social groups and social aggregates. This is apparent in the taboo social aggregate. In this case the

boundary is the divide between the accepted behaviour of open society and behaviour of the taboo social aggregate. To be deviant is evidence of such cultural boundaries being breached.

The theatre operates under certain codes of behaviour accepted as appropriate by society at large. Theatre of Taboos questions these codes of behaviour. As described in Chapter 1, taboo-breaking writers ignored or contested accepted cultural boundaries. Neilson, Ravenhill and McDonagh voiced and simulated taboo behaviour, and by transcending taboo prohibitions they transcended cultural boundaries.

By breaching cultural boundaries the Theatre of Taboos challenges cultural sensitivities. Sensitivities can be understood as the emotional responses one has against a form of stimuli, a reactive sensation. Sensitivity implies an emotional connection, leading to an emotional response. In relation to society, sensitivities are emotional responses on the part of society. Cultural sensitivities are breached when boundaries are transcended. Sensitivities are felt when certain unacceptable behaviour occurs.

Governing bodies enforce limitations and restrictions to assist society in recognising cultural boundaries. These governing bodies can consist of any person or organization that impose policies, administer restrictions and/or limitations. Governing bodies can include judicial, legal, religious, parental or educational entities. In this context, a governing body can be seen as being in a position of responsibility and control, in regulating a certain aspect of society, and can operate at levels ranging from the individual to the societal.

Limitations can include circumstances or conditions, determined by a governing body, which limit the amount of movement in any given environment, actually or metaphorically. The act or state of limitation implies a restriction. In context, limitations can be conditions and parameters that limit one's ability to transcend cultural boundaries.

Restrictions, on the other hand, have the connotation of being a designated constraint, unlike limitations that suggest a certain amount of movement before a limit is

reached. Restrictions imply a definitive ban. A restriction is codified through the form of law, restricted access and/or regulations, determining what is appropriate and what is not from the outset, unlike having some level of movement as suggested with limitations.

Cultural boundaries are most recognisable in the theatre through the form of censorship. Censorship is not only applied by official censorship boards, but can be employed by theatre managers, writers, directors, actors and other theatre professionals. They often impose limitations and restrictions that, strictly speaking, are not censorship. Community groups can influence, or impose limitations on a production, and again, is not strictly censorship. However, the word censorship is often used to refer to such limitations and restrictions. Also, production companies may have their own set of guidelines. These can be conveyed as a form of censorship, realised through limitations and restriction.

The Censor is an example of a thematic response to censorship. It addresses the effect of censorship applied to art. Dawn Sova writes about the dangers of censorship in her book *Banned Plays*:

The suppression of drama remains a disturbing reality in the twenty first century, and one that is not dealt with often enough because many people mistakenly view stage censorship as an archaism belonging only to the past. Official government censors no longer exist in England, France, and the United States to determine which plays will be licensed for public performance, but organized groups remain effective in pressuring theatres and theatre groups, both amateur and professional, to cancel planned performances of plays. Such power may be more dangerous than that wielded by governments in the past, because challenges in recent years have been based on the interests of one group having a specialized agenda against the many. (Sova 2004, p.XI)

Nicole Boireau, an editor of the *Contemporary Theatre Review*, wrote in the 'Introduction' to *Beyond Taboos: Images of Outrageousness in Recent English Speaking Drama*:

Censorship is the way societies try to protect themselves from the attacks of the theatre and/or of the written word. Taboos are generated by all societies; they are internalised and defended by those who benefit from the imposition of rules. A very broad definition of the word 'taboo' would involve what is morally forbidden, be it in the social, political and religious fields. (Boireau 1996, p1)

It is important to question why cultural boundaries, such as censorship, exist. Answers may be found through investigating the purpose these boundaries serve. Governing bodies impose limitations and restrictions to uphold both human and civil rights and to protect society. It is their obligation to protect and secure the individual, group, organization, state or country they represent. The boundaries that governing bodies stipulate assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities. Boundaries may also be set on moral or ethical grounds or may simply be expedient, or politically driven.

A governing body that ignores its responsibilities can be seen as negligent. Being negligent can attract sanctions or penalties. Therefore, the phrase 'duty of care' becomes significant. Duty of care implies that information regarding anything that may offend, harm or worse, be made known. It involves precautions designed to avoid any injury, either physical or mental, otherwise the governing body could be viewed as negligent. The theatre has a duty of care to its audience. The governing body (in this case the theatre) sets boundaries to minimise the possibility of anyone being harmed, or adversely stigmatised, while under its care (Human Services Victoria 2006).

Censorship is only one example of the limitations or restrictions imposed by governing bodies. Any form of limitation or restriction imposed in relation to protection, responsibility and duty of care is an example of a manifested cultural boundary.

Cultural boundaries are supported by sanctions and penalties. As indicated in Chapter 1, sanctions are 'rewards or penalties directed at desired or undesired behaviour. They can be negative, or positive' (Hodges-Persell 1987, p.169). They act as a deterrent to the violation of cultural boundaries. The fear of negative sanctions acts as a management device for unacceptable behaviour. Like Hodges-Persell, Abercrombie supports the notion that negative sanctions assist in managing deviant behaviour: 'Sanctions may be either positive or negative. Positive sanctions reward behaviour that conforms to social norms, while negative sanctions restrain deviant behaviour' (Abercrombie 2000, p.307).

According to the *Macquarie Dictionary* (1998), a penalty is 'a punishment imposed or incurred for a violation of law or rule'. A penalty for transcending a taboo prohibition, or even ignoring censorship restraints and duty of care, could result in negative financial sanctions. Extreme cases could result in legal prosecution.

Although the Theatre of Taboos represents a sub-cultural social aggregate, it does not necessarily exist as a sub-cultural art form. It operates as an art form in open society. Deviants exist and continue to practice the sacred, forbidden, and unclean regardless of the implications. The point is that the Theatre of Taboos operates in this context; it operates in open society, representative of unacceptable behaviour in that open society. It appears that the limitations and restriction – sanctions and penalties, instigated to manage society's behaviour, are discounted. Essentially, for a short period of time, taboos function in open society, testing the strength of cultural boundaries (such as censorship).

Normal social rules are suspended during a theatrical performance. Theatre is given licence to perform, simulate and present behaviour that would normally be illicit. The behaviour simulated and presented in a Theatre of Taboos performance might attract serious sanctions and penalties if it were to actually occur in open society. The theatre, to some extent, implies complicity, a tacit approval, on the part of the audience. The audience might still find their sensitivities confronted, even experience shock, as taboo behaviour is condoned (even if tacitly). Why then does the theatre have the ability to present society's taboos free of sanctions, and why do the simulations that occur within the Theatre of Taboos go unpunished? I believe it to be too extensive a question to be fully addressed in this particular investigation. The question – 'how does the theatre operate free of social sanctions?' is one I wish to address later, perhaps in further study.

Important to this current investigation is how cultural boundaries affect the way the Theatre of Taboos operates. We understand that the Theatre of Taboos goes beyond what is acceptable in conventional theatre. Therefore, it goes beyond cultural boundaries both in delivery and thematically. As Sierz writes, the theatre can question the level of accepted behaviour for the stage, confronting sensitivities and causing a reaction:

The language is usually filthy, characters talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate each another, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly violent. At its best, this kind of theatre is so powerful, so visceral, that it forces audiences to react. (Sierz 2000, p.5)

By simulating unacceptable behaviour, and mentioning the unmentionable, and using aggressive language, the Theatre of Taboos effectively creates its own cultural boundaries, boundaries that could be limitless. The playwrights I define as being part of Theatre of Taboos provide ample evidence of this. Ravenhill shows extreme sex in *Shopping and Fucking*, and Neilson, defecation, in *The Censor*. I also include in the Theatre of Taboos canon: Irvine Welsh, who uses explicit drug use in *Trainspotting* (1993); David Eldridge, who tells the story of a teenager in a sexual relationship with his best friend's mother, *Serving It Up* (1996); Tracy Letts' disturbing portrayal of a young man who sells his slightly disabled sister for sex to pay a hit man to kill his mother, *Killer Joe* (1993); Edward Albee's love affair between man and goat, *The Goat* (2002). When taboos are violated, boundaries become unrecognisable, limitations and restrictions bypassed. The intention of Theatre of Taboos is to break through these boundaries, and thereby challenge society's norms.

I am able to draw on my own experiences from staging *The Censor*. I was made aware of a duty of care towards the audience, requiring certain actions on my behalf. Towards the bottom of the cover page of the theatre program, a warning was inserted:

WARNING
STRONG ADULT CONTENT & LANGUAGE

The warning is a responsibility, alerting the audience that the production could affect their sensitivities. The warning is common practice at the School of Visual and Performing Arts (SVPA), where the production was staged, as well as in my local theatrical community, and elsewhere I predict. As the director, I felt disappointed at the requirement. I believe it takes away from the immediacy of the action, nullifying the surprise. Theatre of Taboos is a construct of taboo behaviour, the audience, on the other hand, is a construct of open society. The writer of the play and the company who produce Theatre of Taboos may ignore cultural boundaries, but boundaries remain for the general public (open society). However, upon entering the theatre and acknowledging the warnings the audience become willing participants. This will be looked at in depth in Chapter 3.

I followed the criteria stipulated for a Theatre of Taboos when constructing 'Ruled Lines', including a conscious decision to transcend cultural boundaries. Because of that, I may have placed myself in a difficult situation (as I am yet to stage 'Ruled Lines' I can only conjecture). The difficulty I predict is having a fifteen-year-old character simulate sexual intercourse in front of an audience. Most likely, it will not actually be a fifteen-year-old actor. However, the notion itself transcends cultural boundaries.

Having an actor simulate sex, semi-naked, on stage raises the issue of duty of care. If the actor is from the SVPA, that is, an educational institution, there is a risk of neglecting the School's duty of care to the students. A student should not be requested to perform actions they are personally uncomfortable with. If the actor is from another educational institution, such as a college or high school, the same problem exists. The actor may not believe there is a duty of care issue, but the said institution's credibility may come under question from the community. If the actor comes from the theatrical community, outside of an educational institution, they may appear too old, hence the predicament. The play is intended to transcend cultural boundaries, yet in production it may be restricted by them.

Obviously, there are cultural restraints that prevent using an actual fifteen year-old actor. Which raises the question – could I possibly be sanctioned and penalised if I were to do so? I would predict members of community might impose some negative sanctions upon myself if I were to cast a fifteen year-old actor. I am not certain there would be legal sanctions imposed. Furthermore, would I be breaking conventions to cast fifteen year-old? Would it be unethical? I acknowledge that I am personally culturally conditioned, and not likely to break conventions by casting someone younger than eighteen. Nevertheless, it adds to the construction of a Theatre of Taboos. If cultural boundaries are crossed, and limitations and restrictions ignored, then 'Ruled Lines' successfully serves the predicted purposes of the Theatre of Taboos. That is, to illuminate the taboo social aggregate, and to challenge social norms through the transcending of cultural boundaries.

'Ruled Lines' will carry a similar warning as *The Censor*, alerting the audience that they will be subjected to material that might affect their sensitivities. This specific warning will alert the audience to offensive language and the sexual simulation of statutory rape. The concept of alerting the audience may be the last cultural boundary the Theatre of Taboos is yet to cross. What would happen if it were ignored? Would that rewrite the contract the theatre has with the audience? Surprise still remains a strong point of most narrative. It can be positive, making the audience think; 'I wasn't expecting that but now it has happened I can see why it is logical'. Or it can be negative, 'I was not expecting that and I do not buy it, it is just sensationalism'.

Theatre of Taboos acts as a bridge between open society and the sub-cultural taboo aggregate. The side touching open society still abides by some limitations and restriction (the warnings, for example). Seemingly, the taboo social aggregate ignores cultural boundaries, operating under its own guidelines. This, I believe, does not affect how taboos operate in theatre. In the Theatre of Taboos, I believe, the limitations and restriction of cultural boundaries are ignored; sanctions and penalties are not forthcoming. There is evidence to suggest playwrights who wish to simulate any action on stage, will.

3.0 The Construction and Sensitivities of the Contemporary Theatre Audience

This particular investigation gives the opportunity to examine how an audience responds to the Theatre of Taboos. This chapter is intended to examine the contemporary theatre audience through its construction, and how an audience relates to a Theatre of Taboos. For the purpose of this analysis I will view the audience in two ways. Firstly, I will examine the audience as a consumer. Looking at how theatre becomes an entertainment product, willingly purchased through a transaction, including the repercussions of purchasing Theatre of Taboos (as a product). Secondly, I will examine the audience as a social group, representative of open society. Essentially the audience is viewing a presentation of itself, and how that affects its sensitivities.

In the broadest sense, audience can be defined as a group of people gathered for the purpose of listening and/or spectating. This can refer to any gathering at a sporting event or major spectacle. 'There are audiences for television, popular music, newspapers and magazines, cinema, radio and theatre' (Abercrombie 2000, p.19). The audience referred to hereafter is the contemporary Western audience that patronises a theatrical establishment. It is assumed that the audience pay an admission fee, or are invited to view the theatrical presentation in question. This audience is made up of any number of individuals. The audience, in the context of this investigation, is the recipient of Theatre of Taboos.

3.1 The Audience as a Consumer

How does the theatrical audience operate as consumers of a product? A contemporary dictionary notes that, to be a consumer, the audience must 'use', in the sense of 'acquire goods or services for direct use or ownership, rather than for resale or use in production and manufacturing'. Simply, an individual audience member is a customer of theatre, purchasing its offerings. They purchase the offering for themselves, not for resale or manufacturing purposes. The audience member pays an admission fee (or is

an invited guest) and takes his or her seat in the expectation of being entertained. For whatever the fee, the audience member acquires an individual allocation of the product, commonly realised through a ticket and seat. To be entertained, the audience member must firstly be engaged by the stimulus. The audience member must receive something. In this context, the stimulus is the drama created by the Theatre of Taboos.

As a product, the Theatre of Taboos is 'produced by action or operation', to cite the *Macquarie Dictionary* definition. The Theatre of Taboos is produced as a sum of creative elements: script, directing, and acting. It is a result of rehearsal and production operations. It is presented as a performance and sold in separate lots, according to available seating capacity. The lots, in common practice, are available for purchase. This is the basic concept of theatre as a product, and the audience as a consumer.

The Theatre of Taboos requires definition as a product for two reasons. Firstly, to understand what it is that is purchased, and secondly, to understand what the Theatre of Taboos has to offer an audience in return for their purchase. Importantly this determines the use of Theatre of Taboos. Therefore, what sort of product is it? The Theatre of Taboos is a theatrical re-creation, simulation and/or discussion of taboo practice and behaviour. It offers a challenging perspective of the taboo social norm. We understand that the Theatre of Taboos does not necessarily need to simulate taboo behaviour. For example, *The Censor*, and *The Pillowman*, are both confronting through their use of taboos. The former utilises confronting actions to support the drama. The latter, employs explicit verbal discussion. They both address taboos, and hence belong to the Theatre of Taboos genre. The genre raises an emotional ambivalence by offering an alternative to the societal norm perspective of taboo deviants.

As a product, the Theatre of Taboos is presented in a naturalistic style. This allows the product to visually represent life, a simulacrum of real life. Martin Esslin describes naturalistic theatre in his book, *An Anatomy of Drama*, as a 'realistic representation of every day life' (Esslin 1996, p.60). Naturalism, I believe, supports the comprehension of Theatre of Taboos, assisting its believability. Believability is important, because the Theatre of Taboos represents an existent, but often silent, facet of society. It has

the ability to alert an audience to a taboo practice or behaviour that they might not have previously witnessed or experienced, in a realistic style. In their book, *Responses to Drama*, Thelma Altshuler, and Richard Paul Janaro, note that:

The theatre has an important function in thus alerting us to the existence of types and categories of people. Other forms of art do this too (literature, painting, sculpture) but not precisely as the theatre can do it, for the theatre offers a facsimile of the real world. (Altshuler & Janaro 1967, p.5)

Considering the Theatre of Taboos ‘a product’, what can the audience do with the product it has purchased? Simply, the audience can observe (observation being a form of consumption), but the audience is also given the opportunity to respond, therefore the experience is interactive and highly affective.

In my previous experience, when staging ‘Heads in the Sand’, and *The Censor*, the audience experiences an emotional ambivalence. The audience is given the opportunity to support the perspective of the taboo shown (a challenging perspective of the social norm), by extending their sympathy towards the deviant. This creates a compromising environment. If the social norm is to condemn the taboo, and the audience is offered an alternative view (an alternative to the social norm), what is the right response? In the context of Theatre of Taboos, the alternative social norm might seem acceptable. Hence, the compromising environment between the appropriate, open society, response and the response encouraged by the Theatre of Taboos.

Howard Barker, in his book, *Arguments for a Theatre*, writes in support of the efforts of playwrights who choose to offer the audience an emotional ambivalence:

A theatre which honours its audience will demand of its writers that they write in hazard of their consciences, for the writers are paid to think dangerously, they are explorers of the imagination, the audience expects it of them. If they think safely, what is the virtue of them? Do you want to pay ten pound to be told what you knew already? That is theft. Do you want to agree all the time? That is flattery. (Barker 1998, p.46)

I will use *The Censor* as an example of an audience’s emotional response. A specific audience member may have little, or no, understanding of coprophilia, and due to its taboo connotations, despise it. However, through the ‘hazardousness’ of Neilson’s writing, that specific audience member might leave a viewing of *The Censor* with a greater understanding, even sympathy for a coprophiliac. Neilson’s ability to explore

the imagination of the individual audience member allows them to respond emotionally. Neilson offers a perspective of taboo behaviour that the audience might not have previously encountered. That is not 'theft', referring to Barker (Barker 1998, p.46). The individual audience member in question may not agree with the perspective, but they might not want to 'agree all the time'. In *The Censor*, as with the Theatre of Taboos, offering an alternative to the social norm creates an emotional ambivalence and a compromising environment for the audience.

In relation to 'Ruled Lines', I intend to present the honesty and tenderness of the relationship between *Adam* and *Michelle*. As an entertainment product, 'Ruled Lines' offers the audience an understanding and compassionate perspective of a student-teacher sexual relationship. It is intended that this perspective is uncommon, and that the general consensus amongst society is that a relationship, such as *Adam* and *Michelle*'s, should not be romanticised. 'Ruled Lines' is not intended to show an audience a perspective they 'know already'.

It is intended, 'Ruled Lines' will encourage the audience to make an emotional response, to develop an unexpected empathy towards the deviant, *Adam*. It is designed to provoke two contrasting responses from the audience. The first is to sympathise with the relationship, through understanding the predicament and believing it to be acceptable. The second is to condemn the relationship, on the grounds that it is inappropriate and unworthy of sympathy. The second response conforms to the social norm. Responding in favour of the relationship will go against the social norm, creating the emotional ambivalence.

'Ruled Lines' has not been written with the assumption that the relationship between *Adam* and *Michelle* is socially acceptable. As a product, the production of 'Ruled Lines' explores taboos. It is, simply, a theatrical presentation to which the audience can respond. 'Ruled Lines' extends an insight into categories of people that would not normally be expressed. The Ruled Lines' audience will have their imaginations explored, as Barker suggests. For a short period of time, the audience will be offered an opportunity to be a part of the taboo social aggregate, or at least to be on that 'other' side of the boundary

3.2 The Audience as a Social Group

I wish to identify the audience as a single social group, representative of open society. This social group is made up of individuals, and amongst them would be participants from a vast array of sub-cultural social aggregates, including deviants. The reason for identifying the audience in this way is to analyse what happens when it views itself. The Theatre of Taboos exposes the audience to a realistic theatrical representation of its own behaviours and practices. The core of the statement is that the audience, as a social group, potentially watches itself – the Theatre of Taboos being representative of sub-cultural behaviour. The idea works if you accept that sub-cultural activity, such as taboo behaviour, actually occurs in society. Symbolically, the theatrical fourth wall is a mirror. Therefore, if the audience choose to make emotional judgments on the presentation, they are making emotional judgements on themselves.

The production of 'Ruled Lines' exposes the audience to a taboo deviant who actively participates in strongly prohibited social practice. The production theatrically explores a taboo practice that is socially derived, and not a taboo that is specific to a theatrical environment. For example, urinating in one's own privacy is quite acceptable behaviour. However to present that behaviour in naturalistic drama might be seen as taboo in the Theatre. 'Ruled Lines' focuses on a sexual relationship between a teacher and their student, which is considered taboo.

The taboo explored throughout 'Ruled Lines' is defined by the naturalistic portrayal of the sexual relationship between *Adam* and *Michelle*. During the performance *Adam* experiences moral conflict, understanding that what he is participating in is socially unacceptable. This concept is further enhanced by the juxtaposition of two sets in the singular performance space, which *Adam* performs in simultaneously. This is a deliberate technique to allow *Adam* to express two contrasting emotions, which is evident of his inner turmoil. The technique was based upon the saying 'there is always two sides to every story'. (For further understanding of this technique refer to Appendix 1 – 'Ruled Lines' Script, in the accompanying Appendices.)

It is important to mention that 'Ruled Lines' premiere production (during which it was assessed) was a part of a double bill presentation. Therefore it is not unreasonable

to suggest that the audience's reaction was altered due to the production being the second performance of the night. It is difficult to assess what the reaction would have been if 'Ruled Lines' was performed in isolation. Also, I feel it is important to place the production in context to its environment, being performed in a University-based theatre program, acknowledging that the actors and production crew were either current students of the University, or past students with a current relationship to it. The University's duty of care was therefore a consideration when staging the production, as I was conscious not to compromise the institution's position.

In the same respect, the audience is seen as an extension of the University's duty of care. The 'Ruled Lines' audience is asked to make an emotional response, and to make a judgement within themselves to either support, or condemn the relationship between *Adam* and *Michelle*. The decision is made with the knowledge and opinions the audience have brought with them from open society into the theatre. If the audience makes the decision to support the taboo relationship, it is possible they might become uncomfortable with their position. Supporting sexual relations with minors could lead an audience member to question his or her opinions relating to other sexual taboo activities and behaviours outside of the theatre, within their society. The question I pose is will 'Ruled Lines' change an audience member's opinion on sexual relationships with minors, especially that of statutory rape? If the audience is in favour of the taboo relationship presented in 'Ruled Lines', are they, as a whole, transcending social norms?

Bernard Beckerman's book, *Theatrical Presentation – Performer, Audience and Act* (1990), discusses the notion that an audience confronted with the playing out of taboos, reacts emotionally, drawing from itself. By reacting emotionally, the audience becomes connected with the taboo, making it easier to accept the alternative social norm presented by the Theatre of Taboos. Beckerman writes:

History seems to show that when a performer or a production provokes an audience frontally, the response is equally direct. Initially, when the confrontation is novel, an audience tend to reject challenges. As it becomes familiar with the content or the form of a challenge, it might very well co-opt or absorb it. When, however, dialectic action penetrates a spectator, activating one value-potential against another, then the risk is genuine. Then the audience must face itself. (Beckerman 1990, p.86)

Beckerman addresses the same idea as Freud, that emotional ambivalence is an activation point. He implies that an audience placed in a challenging environment, will respond emotionally. In the context of 'Ruled Lines', the character of *Adam* is breaking the law, even violating *Michelle*'s human rights. Through the performance, the structure and the characterisation of the play, the audience have the opportunity to understand and comprehend *Adam*'s situation. Therefore, as he lies dying in the final image of the play, the audience is confronted with one value-potential against another. Does the audience hope that *Adam* will live, so that he and *Michelle* can continue their relationship? Or does the audience conform to the social norm, believing that the appropriate retribution has been delivered? The final image of the play is asking the audience whether they think *Adam* should be punished for his behaviour, and if not, what is the alternative; and what does the alternative mean for the structure of social norms? The responses amongst the audience will vary, as an audience is made up of any number of individuals. Collectively, there will be no definitive answer.

Conclusion

The outcomes of 'Revealing the Taboo' are demonstrated through the production of 'Ruled Lines'. The production presents my understanding of the operation of taboos in theatre, representing the Theatre of Taboos. 'Ruled Lines' includes the taboo of a student/teacher sexual relationship. The relationship is taboo, practiced on a sub-cultural level, outside what is acceptable behaviour for open society. The taboo is revealed from a perspective that challenges the audience's perception of such a relationship. 'Ruled Lines' challenges the taboo social norm, offering an alternative.

The 'Ruled Lines' audience becomes compromised, when they are asked, metaphorically, whether they agree, or disagree with the taboo relationship. They are given the opportunity to witness taboo behaviour realistically when *Adam* and *Michelle* make love. By watching the audience are compromised, becoming unwilling participants; they have related to the taboo and become deviant. If the audience look away, they disagree with the relationship, conforming to the accepted norm. The audience are further questioned at the conclusion of the play, when they are asked whether *Adam* deserves to die for his actions.

As a representative of Theatre of Taboos, 'Ruled Lines' reveals an insight into the sub-cultural environment of the taboo social aggregate. 'Ruled Lines' presents an understanding perspective of the behaviour and practices of the taboo social aggregate. This has the ability to lead to a wider understanding, which reduces ignorance amongst the individuals in open society who denounce taboo behaviour without a comprehensive understanding of it. Essentially, the Theatre of Taboos acts as voice for the taboo social aggregate.

A Theatre of Taboos' audience is subjected to an uncommon perspective of their own society, looking into the sacred, forbidden and unclean. The Theatre of Taboos shines a light on the dark, giving a voice to those that struggle to find their own in open society. As a product, Theatre of Taboos offers information and emotional connection to practices and behaviour shunned by open society. The audience may choose to use

this information however they wish, as no one is forcing them to come to the theatre, or to make decisions when they get there. The audience is free to place their sensitivities wherever they feel appropriate. 'Ruled Lines', I hope, is able to present an understanding, even offer a compassionate view of the taboo it explores.

I personally believe 'Ruled Lines' achieves the proposed outcomes, answering the research questions discussed. To propose a final statement on what the Theatre of Taboos can achieve: I believe, through its ability to represent the taboo social aggregate, and by challenging social norms, it can educate open society. Through education, understanding is achieved. The importance of the Theatre of Taboos genre is evidenced by its history. Shaw and Ibsen, and also In-Yer-Face theatre, have found it important to examine society's taboos. Taboos, as I understand them, will always be a part of society, the theatre being a powerful means of exploring and challenging them.

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